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S-2464

18 September 1967

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MEMORANDUM FOR: [REDACTED] FE/Laos  
SUBJECT: North Vietnamese Infiltration Losses

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1. North Vietnamese army troops infiltrating into South Vietnam through Laos during 1966 are estimated to have sustained permanent losses of 10 to 20 percent of the total number of troops that departed from North Vietnam. At least 55,000 and possibly 85,000 NVA troops are estimated to have successfully infiltrated into South Vietnam during 1966. Thus, it is probable that 5,000 to 15,000 men were permanently lost during infiltration during 1966.

2. This range results from three recent OER attempts to quantify infiltration losses. The most recent and intensive study suggests, however, that a best estimate would be closer to the 10 percent than the 20 percent. Approximately 80 percent of these losses are believed to be associated with illness -- usually malaria -- and include soldiers who die in the Lao jungles, are permanently left behind, or arrive in South Vietnam too debilitated by sickness to be of any military usefulness. Close to half of all infiltrators are believed to have been affected by malaria or dietary deficiency-associated diseases during their trip south.

3. Less than 10 percent of all permanent losses were caused by air attacks, although air harassment and interdiction has indirectly increased the sickness and desertion loss rates. Air attacks have forced units to change their mode of movement in NVN from train and truck to travel on foot, increasing the time needed to infiltrate. In addition, attacks in Laos and along the South Vietnam border have forced more enemy troops to move at night, stretched out movement times, and restricted the availability of medical supplies and food. Losses due to desertions are slightly more than 10 percent of total losses. Significantly, however, most of these losses take place in North Vietnam, before the morale of infiltrators is sapped by illness, heavy loads, and primitive living conditions. Apparently NVA troops are unwilling to risk leaving their units in the unfamiliar, unpopulated jungle areas of Laos and South Vietnam despite the hardships they encounter.

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4. Although inadequate data is available to reach any conclusions about 1967 loss rates, scattered reports from 1967 infiltrators indicate that the overall rate is similar or slightly higher than the 1966 rate. The 1966 loss rates were, in turn, markedly higher than tentative estimates of 1965 rates.

Methodology

In the past few months OER has used three methodologies for analyzing infiltration loss data. The first attempt yielded the 20 percent estimate and employed assumptions that would lead us to expect it is the upper limit; similarly, it is believed that the 10 percent estimate constitutes the lower limit. In the most recent attempt, a total of about 14,000 Laotian route infiltrators in 42 units were selected for inclusion in the 1966 data base. Criterion for sample inclusion was mention of loss rates to two or more of three causes: desertion, air strikes, and illness incidence. All information was taken from rallier and captive interrogation reports. Sample selection was complicated, however, by poor debriefing procedures and inadequate information as to unit size. To produce estimates of permanent losses it is assumed that one-half of all deserters eventually returned to duty; that two-thirds of the men who drop out of their units during infiltration are returned to duty -- the remainder are assumed to have died or become permanently disabled; and that five percent of all infiltrators that contact malaria eventually die or are permanently disabled by the disease.

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Acting Chief, Special Projects

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